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Only drawn that way: ethnic and racial difference in *Macskafogó/Cat City* (1986) and *Macskafogó 2/Cat City 2* (2007)¹

Introduction

The 1986 animated feature *Macskafogó/Cat City* (Neppⁱ and Ternovszky, 1986) is a common reference point for a whole generation of Hungarians now in their 30s and 40s. I am a member of that generation. I saw the film on its release in the cinema, and since then, many times on VHS, DVD and more recently on YouTube and torrent download. I can quote it at length, although this is a feat that is by no means unique. However, I must confess that for a long time I have been troubled by the film. I have grown sick of protesting its innocence and claiming that, like an aged relative with outdated views, it's not racist, it just doesn't know better.

The shocked gasps of Western viewers when they hear the line 'that's the last time I deal with blacks' shocked me into the realization that no matter the context, this line is beyond the pale. (I would like to tell you that it drew a shocked gasp from me when I first heard it. I was 7. It didn't.) Never mind that it's a line spoken by Mr Teufel, the villain, that it's supposed to illustrate his villainy, that it refers to a black cat, this line should not be defended. Rather, it should be considered dispassionately, for it is evidence that this old generational favourite has an ugly face, and it suggests uncomfortable truths about Hungarian attitudes to race and ethnicity.ⁱⁱ

This paper was born out of this need to revisit the film with a critical eye. It argues that *Cat City* gives evidence of racist and anti-Semitic reflexes in Hungarian popular discourse of the 1980s. It further contends that the same reflexes can be seen at work two decades on, when the sequel was released, and that it is the sequel that unlocks the reading that exposes these disturbing reflexes. It is important to note at this point, however, that it is not the contention of this paper that the film or its sequel was made with any racist or anti-Semitic intent.

First I sketch the political, economic and cultural contexts in which the films were made. I go on to give a brief outline of their respective plots. I then explain how the first film can be seen to be informed by its political context in its depiction of mouse society as a desirable (or at least preferable) social order to cat society. I contend that the films make use of crude national and racial stereotypes. I go on to suggest that *Cat City* and its sequel paint the nightmare vision of *nemzethalál*, or death of the nation, a recurring theme in Hungarian nationalist thinking. I argue that when taken together, the two films cohere to form a narrative about the threat posed to the body of the nation by the cats. In this reading the mice are a people united in battle against the cats, parasitic and nationless servants of Satan.

At the time of *Cat City*'s release to lukewarm critical reception in 1986, Hungary was faced with serious economic woes. János Kádár², in office since the 1956 revolution and the brutal repression that followed, had offered Hungarians limited economic freedoms in exchange for acquiescence with continued political and social repression. Referred to as the

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‘merriest barracks’ in the Eastern bloc, Hungary’s limited consumerism was, however, fast becoming unsustainable. By the middle of the decade the grey economy, fuelled by small private enterprise, was expanding rapidly as the official economy was collapsing. Kádár’s successor would begin reforms in just two years, paving the way for the transition to multiparty democracy by 1989.

An emblematic object of this era was the VHS. VCRs were newly available, and Hungarian filmmakers, for the first time in decades, had easy access to the films of the west. This was beginning to show in their work. Pastiche and satire were the order of the day. The review in the highbrow film magazine *Filmvilág* suggested that the film was ideologically unsound, and the critic sneered at the film’s gleeful appropriation of western generic tropes. What the critic saw as primitive mishmash is clearly identifiable as post-modern intertextuality. This is clearly linked to the decline of the institutional background and industry infrastructure in late-communist Hungary. The films of the period were low-budget and small-scale, or as the label by which they are known expresses so succinctly: DIY films. *Cat City*³ is a prime example.

The Hungarian animation studio Pannonia was an established production centre with a good international reputation for high quality at low cost. René Laloux and Moebius⁴ among many others made films there. Animation being a reasonably cheap, if painstakingly produced, form of entertainment, Pannonia was the chief source of children’s programming in communist Hungary, and a prolific exporter to Warsaw Pact countries. Among its stable of filmmakers was the veteran animator József Nepp, creator of some of the most loved cartoon characters in Hungary. He teamed up with the up-and-comer Béla Ternovszky, fresh off the back of the successful Hungarian-West German coproduction *Meister Eder und sein Pumuckl*⁵ (1982). Together they wrote, drew and directed *Cat City*.

Twenty years later they would team up again to make the sequel, *Cat City 2: Cat of Satan*. The political landscape had changed dramatically by 2007. Four free elections later and as a member of the EU and NATO, Hungary was no longer the odd one out in the Eastern bloc, but a fairly typical emerging economy: accumulating public debt, putting off essential reforms and marked by deep political divisions after decades of forcibly imposed unity. As in other countries of the region, a rapidly growing economy papered over these cracks. With the communist era infrastructure dismantled or sold off, domestic film production relied heavily on subsidies. Despite an art film boom, commercial production was limited. Pannonia had been privatized and its old stable of filmmakers were now operating mostly freelance. This, coupled with advances in technology have meant that animation was again what it once had been: a DIY medium.

The first film tells the story of the desperate battle of mouse society against the multinational organization of bloodthirsty cats. The mice are held hostage by a criminal horde of cat businessmen with no regard for the rule of law or common decency. Mice are robbed in their homes, terrorized on the streets and under total surveillance, even in the heart of mouse Government. The mice, however, have a plan: literally a plan, and it needs to be picked up in Japan and delivered to Intermouse HQ. Enter the legendary secret agent Grabowski. His mission is a success and the mice build the ‘Cat-catcher’ (the film’s Hungarian title), a vast metal dog that swallows the cats whole and excretes them docile and harmless.⁶ Simply presented in traditional cell animation, the film still evokes the atmosphere of a Bond

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spectacular, with explosions, car chases, glamorous locations, lavish musical interludes and titillation in the form of plenty of tail.⁷

The sequel tells the story of a primitive cat tribe in Africa, who have continued to terrorize the indigenous mouse population, unaware of the mouse victory throughout the known world. The cats stumble across the truth, and summon Moloch, a daemon from hell to help free their brothers, kept docile with the aid of a device built into the ribbons they are compelled to wear by their mice masters. Moloch defeats the mouse army, but the Cat-catcher is redeployed and it pacifies all but a small number of cats who surrender to Grabowski. In their generosity of spirit, the mice offer the cats a treaty, under which a 99-year truce is declared and both parties are allowed to retain all assets accumulated to date. The cheesy song over the end-credits, however, warns of pointy claws hidden in velvet paws, suggesting that it won't be long before the cats are back to their old ways.

The original film may look to the west for its references, which include the 1970s spy film⁸, the Star Wars franchise⁹, the vampire film¹⁰ and the gangster genre¹¹, but its representation of mouse society seems to reflect a well-learned lesson about power behind the Iron Curtain. After an initial sequence showing the daily outrages visited by cats upon mice (the binary is established beyond question: mouse good, cat bad), we see the chief representatives of the mice in meeting. This body, the highest decision-making organ of the mouse establishment, is a committee of secret policemen.¹² The reference may be to Bond turning up in M's office to take his orders, but while we're rarely in doubt that Bond's orders, relayed by M, come from the PM, here the order comes from a moustachioed and benevolent old chairman of the committee. Benevolent he may seem, but the chairman of the central committee of the secret police is the highest authority in the land. There is no Parliament, no council, no Government. Just a kindly old man at a round table of secret policemen. The filmmakers may have sought to lampoon the west, but they ended up revealing a truth about where power resides at home: in a small committee of men, one of whom is more equal than the others.

Before I move on to the issue of the nightmare vision of death of the nation brought on by what I suggest is the figure of the parasitic Jew of anti-Semitic propaganda, let me return to the shocking line which I quoted at the start of this paper. Having listened in on the plans of the mouse-politburo, managing director of the cat's crime syndicate, and emblematic villain of the film, Mr Teufel summons an agent. A cross between a talent-agent and a pimp for assassins, a fat black cat dressed in a crumpled suit¹³ turns up. In contrast with the representation of other ethnic characters in the film, he is not marked with crude signs of race. His name is Schwarz. But this is not an explicit reference to blackness. In the films' system of representation blackness is indicated through external racial markers, or corporeal inscriptions of race such as thick lips or dark skin.¹⁴¹⁵¹⁶ The name Schwartz then must be a label of Jewishness. As he himself insists when Teufel persists in calling him plain Schwartz, he is von Schwartz. It is his name, and the implicit aspiration to a nobility that is denied by those around him, as well as his manner of obsequious dissimulation that fully unmask him as the

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cunning, ambitious, boastful Jew of anti-Semitic propaganda.¹⁷ With a contempt tinged with approval Mr Teufel tells him: 'Schwartz, you are an extortionist.' Schwartz replies with a familiarity that few risk in Teufel's presence: 'thanks for the compliment old boy, but you are the true master.' The implication being that they are cut of the same cloth. So when Mr Teufel pays him and remarks that he would never deal with blacks again, the tasteless joke is that Schwartz is not black, but, like Teufel himself, Jewish: a driver of hard bargains, a creep, and a man who lives off the sweat of others. The fact that such a joke can be made in Hungary, and that a film with such an offensive line (to Jewish and black viewers alike) can become a national treasure beloved by one and all, points to the troubling persistence of stereotypical and anti-Semitic representations of Jews and Jewishness in Hungarian popular culture, which I consider in the final section of this paper.

I return to the scrolling text that introduces the film and in the process sketches the vision of the death of a nationⁱⁱⁱ: 'the bloodthirsty cats organized into perfectly-equipped and highly disciplined multinational gangs crudely trampling over law and order and breaching the historical conventions existing between cats and mice have sought to bring about the final destruction of mouse society. But the mice, on the very brink of complete annihilation when the most learned mouse leaders began to contemplate the idea of planetary exodus, unexpectedly found a new ray of hope...' This introduction, which I will show sounds eerily similar to justifications of Hungary's anti-Jewish measures from the 1930s, resurrects the idea of an *indigenous* population under threat of expulsion from its rightful place by a *multinational* criminal business organization. It echoes the Hungarian anti-Semites' claim to the role of victim in their fatalist fantasies of a nation in the throes of death, and the concomitant grotesque misrepresentation of the true power relations between the dominant majority and the gradually excluded and disenfranchised Jewish minority, blamed for all social, economic and political crises and misfortunes in the interwar period. Ultimately, the film's plot can be seen as the last efforts of a homogenous race to stave off complete physical and economic destruction at the hands of a nationless but racially homogenous and parasitic group.

Let me explain this more clearly, as anti-Semitic and racist arguments don't always form an impregnable fortress of logic. What I contend is that the film uses anti-Semitic stereotype to invest its villains with certain characteristics: avarice, cruelty, a tendency to exploitation, a thirst for power, a conspiracy to subvert the established order. The scene with Mr Teufel and von Schwartz illustrates how although inferiority is constructed in the film through racial markers, Jewishness is constructed through behaviour and attitude to power. Just as Schwartz bows and scrapes to Teufel, so Teufel bows and scrapes to his own boss. Thus in the film's internal logic Jewishness is a set of racially determined behaviours (we see these traits only among the cats) that can exist alongside other external racial markers, such as a swarthy complexion or thick lips. The cats are thus overinvested with markers of difference. In this system of representation corporeal inscriptions of blackness and Asian-ness are used to illustrate power. Blackness stands for a lack of intellectual and/or political power and Asian-ness indicates a lack of economic and/or physical power.¹⁸¹⁹²⁰ Jewishness, however, is revealed in behaviour, in the need for economic, political and cultural power, and is fixed as cat-ness by the discourse of zoological race in the films. Thus the idea of irreconcilable racial difference between Jew and non-Jew can be apprehended in the representation of the world as split into cats and mice, where ideas of persecution and victimhood are made manifest in raced embodiment.

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I return to the sequel, which unlocks this reading. Peace reigns as the rightful victors, the mice, enjoy the slave labour of the pacified cats. In a film teeming, as we have seen, with crude racist stereotype and lacking the satirical bite of a dystopic vision (which did inflect the original), we see the cats subjugated and brainwashed, expropriated and disenfranchised, under total control and surveillance.²¹ They are menial labourers, set tasks requiring no intellectual prowess. If they take momentary breaks from work, to light a cheap cigar, for instance, they receive a painful electric shock to punish them for their idleness.²² This is the chilling vision of a Nazi utopia: a vanquished racial foe kept in subjugation for the service of the more deserving race. The tiny tribe of primitive African cats who learn of the global rule of the master-race turn to their deity; not in the heavens, nor in nature, but in the depths of hell²³. To link this to anti-Semitism I cite Norman Cohn and his *Warrant for Genocide*: ‘in the Middle Ages Jews had been seen as agents of Satan... it is one of the achievements of the modern anti-Semitic movement that in the late nineteenth century it was able to revive this archaic superstition’ (1996, 46). It can be seen quite clearly that in envisioning the daemon-assisted rise of a justly oppressed race, *Cat City 2* taps into the discourse of anti-Semitism.

The cats and Moloch set off to break the shackles, the ribbons, that bind their race. They breach the steel mesh fence, reinforced with barbed wire that marks the boundary of the land beyond which the cats are slaves and the mice masters. They succeed in liberating some cats – chiefly the main characters of the original – and destroy much of the military capabilities of the mice. But their cause is not a just one. The Cat-catcher puts an end to the reign of terror of Satan’s left-hand, and the cats, defeated once more, must bow to the rightful victors, the mice. In their generosity, the mice offer the cats a settlement that leaves them with their free will and any property that they may hold. But this must be none, since they had been expropriated, disenfranchised and enslaved for two decades. Therefore the treaty sanctifies the seizure of cat assets that must have taken place at the end of the first film, as we see the mice in exclusive ownership of all wealth in the sequel. And still, the film ends with the reference to sharp claws in velvet paws, a not-too subtle reminder of the racially determined untrustworthiness of cats in their dealings with members of a race that they regard as prey.

Consider this in light of the following, taken from a speech by the interwar anti-Semitic agitator László Budaváry at the national conference of the Association of Awakening Hungarians: ‘We, Hungarians, have given you rights, you had a period of grace, too, some fifty years, during which you could have shown that you are fit to exercise your rights, or not. You convinced us of the contrary, you convinced us that you have grossly abused the confidence placed in you by the nation, and therefore the sovereign nation, which granted you these rights, has the power to withdraw them, to the extent that the nation sees fit. We are happy to settle for a less than total withdrawal of your rights, and it is up to you, Jews, to convince us not to go all the way’ (Gyurgyák 2007, 243). And let us remind ourselves of the scrolling text that opens *Cat City*: ‘the cats [...] crudely trampling over law and order and breaching the historical conventions existing between cats and mice have sought to bring about the final destruction of mouse society.’

Cat City, made in 1986, and its sequel, released in 2007 both tap into this discourse of the treacherous racial enemy of the homogenous and victimized nation having reneged on past agreements and overthrown conventions. Both films suggest that special measures are necessary to limit this racial enemy. They imply that the imposition of restrictions on the freedom of self-disposition of a multinational yet racially homogenous group working in concert to leech off the nation’s wealth is a fair response to the threat they pose. It would be going too far to attribute anti-Semitic or racist intent to the filmmakers, but the reading I

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proposed in this paper indicates the troubling persistence of anti-Semitic and racist stereotype in Hungarian popular discourse, and suggests that, if anything, things have got worse over the past two decades.

Cohn, N. 1996. *Warrant for Genocide: the myth of the Jewish world conspiracy and The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, London: Serif

Gyurgyák, J. 2007. *Ezzé lett magyar hazátok: a magyar nemzeteszme és nacionalizmus története*, Budapest: Osiris

King, C.R., Lugo-Lugo, C.R., Bloodsworth-Lugo, M.K. 2011. *Animating Difference: race, gender and sexuality in contemporary films for children*, Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

ⁱ Nepp on his hope that he taps into the average Hungarian mentality: ‘The key to Disney’s success was that he made all his films to his own taste. And he liked the films that an average American liked, and so about twenty million Americans loved his films. He would sit in the screening room, look at the rushes, and he’d say draw a new scene instead of this one, like so. They’d draw a new scene, and that would work. If you had asked him why, he would have said: because I like it. His was the average American mind-set. I have always hoped I had the Hungarian equivalent.’

Nepp also disowned the sequel to *Macskafogó*, and asked the producers to change his credit from ‘written by’ to ‘based on a script by’ József Nepp.

From: ‘Remekművek megrendelésre’ an interview with József Nepp on Hetek.hu

(http://www.hetek.hu/interju/200907/remekmuvek_megrendelesre) translated by the author. Accessed on 17th April, 2013.

ⁱⁱ Note representation of Mexican bride of Lusta Dick as ugly, pockmarked, nagging, old, hairy, etc. See: the 1995 film *Pocahontas* rejects ugly images of indigenous women still acceptable in the 1950s’ (King et al. 2011, 16) when *Peter Pan* was made by Disney. By comparison, Hungarians are comfortable with that sort of imagery in 2007; writing about the ways in which ‘progress’ has affected the representation of difference, King et al. argue: ‘In many respects “difference” has changed, or, better said, the manners in which individuals and institutions describe it, interpret it, and account for it have changed: appeals to biology have given way to culture and society; overt expressions of racism and (hetero)sexism have become taboo, replaced by covert and coded formulations; a stark division has emerged between behaviors, conversations, and performances for the public or on the front stage and those occurring in private or on the back stage; **humor and intention increasingly “excuse” racist and (hetero)sexist thought and action**; the rhetoric of emancipation and equality has been recorded to protect those in power (reverse racism); universalism and equivalence bleed out the differences that make a difference, converting identity, tradition, and/or community into a resource, a style, an experience equally available to all; and the connection between difference and context, history, and power is eviscerated, cutting loose the former from the latter as free-floating signs.’

ⁱⁱⁱ Himnusz: S lettél magzatod miatt magzatod hamvedre. And in Szózat: S a sírt, melyben egy nemzet sülyyed el népek veszik körül.